

Showcasing Unsung Heroes: Positive PR/Positive Relationships

By Robert Ruder, Ed.D.



Despite the budgetary belt-tightening and what appears to be a gloomy financial future for many of the nation's school districts, south Florida's *Sun Sentinel* recently showcased five noninstructional employees from the Broward County school district.

The *Sun Sentinel* chose to provide readers with a comprehensive look at those employees who, through their efforts and the efforts of their 14,000 coworkers, "help keep schools running while playing big roles in students' daily lives."

Introduced in the January 4, 2009, *Sun Sentinel*'s Sunday edition, the series presented vignettes about five individuals and their respective jobs. Each day focused on the employee's

role within the larger organization with regard to the responsibilities of their positions and their ability to interact positively with students, parents, and other school district employees. Written by Akitah Johnson with accompanying photographs by Susan Stocker, the series introduced readers to the noninstructional glue that holds the Broward County school district together.

The employees were selected from the district's food service, buildings and grounds, secretarial, security, and transportation departments. The articles highlighted that, in addition to performing the routine duties of their assignments, each person went beyond his or her daily responsibilities by relating positively with the diverse populations within the school district community.

As Glades Middle School Principal Krista Herrera noted: "We're in big trouble without them. They are the first line of defense with the public. They give the Band-Aids and kiss the boo-boos, if you will."

The five employees profiled in *Sun Sentinel* were:

Lily Stevenson, assistant cafeteria manager at the Glades Middle School. Stevenson and her food service staff serve lunch to 1,400 children over a two and a half hour time frame. Concerned about the economy, Stevenson realizes that members of her department will be the first fired if additional budget cuts are needed to preserve teaching positions and classroom learning. Without adequate food service personnel, Stevenson says, the students will suffer.

Jimmy Murrow, facilities supervisor at the Hallandale Adult Community Center. In addition to his assigned duties, Murrow gets to know most of the 580 students in the school. Many of the school's students have not realized academic success at other middle and high schools. Among the high-risk student population are chronic truants and juvenile offenders. Others have difficulty learning. As he greets students every day, Murrow gleams a sense of the students' moods. Those who respond to him positively move on to their classes. Those who do not, receive extra attention from Murrow until a smile appears on their faces.

Dottie Reid, secretary to the principal at Palmview Elementary School. A constant stream of students, teachers, and parents assure

that Reid's days are never the same. As the first person to greet visitors to the school, she believes she is instrumental in shaping the public's perception of the school. Butterflies adorn her desk to remind her "of a child's potential to emerge from awkward adolescence and become a beautiful young adult."

Douglas Dorsett, Olsen Middle School's campus security monitor. Having served in the army and air force, Dorsett dresses elegantly. He believes dress is about "pride in presentation" as he goes about his security responsibilities while teaching students about respect and caring for others. Dorsett wants to afford students protection and the same chance that he had. As for the students' parents, Dorsett states, "I meet their parents; I meet their relatives; and I'm able to send them off to their daily jobs with a smile, good hope, and a blessing."

Carolyn Wallace, school bus driver. Wallace has been a school bus driver for 30 years. She asks her pas-

sengers the same question every day, "Where are we going when we graduate from high school?" to which the students enthusiastically reply, "College!" The students on Wallace's bus are not dropped off at the front door of the school; they are presented "to the school, minds alert, ready to learn." Often dealing with children who come from foster care or broken homes, Wallace provides her students with soothing motherly care. In return, she's able to peek at newly lost teeth, to comb messy morning hair, and to enjoy a private conversation with a child in need of a loving ear.

Behind the Scenes

The *Sun Sentinel's* report featured on the first page of the newspaper's local section was entitled "Unsung Heroes." They don't provide classroom instruction, but these employees working behind the scenes are vital, and beloved, in Broward County schools. Written at a time when \$94 million was removed from

this year's budget with the possibility that another \$160 million may be lost for the 2009–2010 school year as a result of reduced state funding, there is a strong likelihood that additional noninstructional staff members, like those included in the week-long report, may lose their jobs.

By providing snippets of what noninstructional staff members do within the parameters of the Broward County school district, the newspaper gave readers a chance to draw their own conclusions about the importance of noninstructional staff and the effect that budget cuts have had or will continue to have in south Florida.

School districts can learn valuable lessons from the *Sun Sentinel* as they think about how they can form positive relationships with the media and the community. See the series at www.SunSentinel.com/unsung.

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